SPEAKER CANNON UNDER THE ROOSEVELT ADMINISTRATION: 1903 - 1907

BY

GEORGE ROGER MAYHILL

B.S., Purdue University, 1932

M.A., University of Illinois, 1936

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN HISTORY IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, 1942

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SPEAKER CANNON UNDER THE ROOSEVELT ADMINISTRATION: 1903-1907

Joseph G. Cannon has the honor of having served more years in Congress than any other one member. For years he was chairman of its very important committee on appropriations, and from 1903 to 1911 he became one of its most powerful speakers. In spite of these accomplishments, his long and stormy career has not been studied. For this reason the most important episode in that career—the Speakership period—has been taken as the theme for this dissertation.

For this many materials existed. A very important source, *the Congressional Record*, presents only the more formal record including special rules, order of business, and complaints by other members against the power of the Speaker. Important remarks of the presiding officer in these volumes are few, so other information was necessary. To get behind the scenes, magazines, newspapers and letters give the best accounts. In order to understand both sides publications both critical and friendly were used. Newspaper stories in this period seem to agree with available manuscript material, showing that their reliability is greater than it is at present. Eleven manuscript collections were searched and these occasionally furnished valuable information. The most fruitful of these were the Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft papers. Interviews were also held with ten persons who lived during the period. One of these, James E. Watson, was Republican whip and constant companion of the Speaker. Another, George W. Norris, introduced the motion in the House which led to the decline of Cannon's power. Others interviewed knew Cannon well either as member or official of the House or of the press gallery.

Cannon's life story is reminiscent of an Horatio Alger tale. Born in 1836 to a North Carolina Quaker family, in a few years he moved to Indiana. His father, a poor country doctor, died when Joe was fifteen. The boy was forced to work for several years in a country store, but soon became interested in law. By using his meager savings he studied for this profession in Terre Haute, Indiana, and Cincinnati, Ohio. After six months formal

education, he settled and starved in a small Illinois town, where he became so discouraged he tore his diploma from the wall and ground it under his feet[1]. When a new county was formed he moved to its county seat, Tuscola, Illinois. His mother and brother joined him there. This brother, Will, who stayed home and earned his money while Joe was in Congress, entered the real estate business. This led to mortgages, later to banking, and finally ended with public utility franchises, all of which were profitable.

Cannon started his political career when he was elected and served as state's attorney during the Civil War. In 1873 he was elected to Congress where he served with the exception of two terms until 1923. There he first attracted attention by a clever reply to a New Jersey congressman, who rebuked the new man from Illinois for having "oats in his pocket". Cannon quickly retorted that he not only had oats in his pocket but hayseed in his hair and that "the Western people generally are affected in the same way"[2].

Having served seventeen years, he suffered his first defeat in the election of 1890. Shortly after this, McKinley, Senator Carter and Cannon met. McKinley and Carter gave reasons why they were glad they had been defeated. Cannon frankly admitted: "That is what I am saying to everyone, but, boys, don't let's lie to one another".[3]

When the Republicans regained control of the House, Cannon became chairman of the appropriations committee. Here he checked requests for funds carefully and was dubbed, as customary with many respectable chairmen of that committee, "Watchdog of the Treasury". Friends and foes alike credited him with saving millions of dollars for the government. John Sharp Williams said that he could ask Cannon about any appropriation and rely on the information explicitly. Speaker Reed also supported his decision. In his office he heard persons who requested appropriations, but after he had refused them, he expected them to

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[1]Busbey, **Uncle Joe Cannon,** 77.

[2]**Cong. Rec.**, 43 Cong., 1 sess., 1609.

[3]Dunn, **Gridiron Nights,** 117.

leave. If they did not, they were treated to part of a large and volcanic vocabulary which grew more voluminous while he was in the House. On the floor his antics are described cleverly in the following:

> The Uncle Joe of appropriation days was a sight worth seeing when a debate was on. His delivery was slashing, sledge-hammery, full of fire and fury. When he got thoroughly interested in his subject the fact was made known in an infallible way. On such occasions, he would take off his coat and throw it on his desk. Provoked by opposition and getting warmed to his subject, his waistcoat would follow his coat; and if the occasion was of sufficient moment to warrant it, off would come collar and necktie. Thus stripped for action, 'Uncle Joe' would move up and down the aisles in long strides, waving his fists in the air and pouring forth a continual flood of sarcasm, invective and denunciation at a rate that taxed the stenographers.[4]

Cannon had been a candidate for Speaker in 1880 and 1890, but even though it had been his major ambition, he had been disappointed. When Speaker David B. Henderson decided to retire in 1902, because progressive ideas on the tariff were being spread in his state by Governor Cummins, Cannon with the help of Representatives Watson, Hemenway and others set up an organization to win. The principal opponent became John Dalzell, member of the ways and means committee, and a high tariff man from Pennsylvania. Inasmuch as Dalzell was from Pittsburg and was believed to represent the steel interests, the cabinet, the President, and the press believed that Cannon would be more friendly to revision of parts of the tariff than would Dalzell. Cannon led them to believe this by a letter to his friend Secretary of the Navy, William H. Moody at this time. Cannon also had the hearty support of the middle west with the exception of a few who were for Joseph W. Babcock of Wisconsin. The elections of 1902 by increasing Republicans from this section and decreasing those from the east helped his cause. Some easterners also joined his forces and by November 20 after Babcock declared for Cannon, the election had been conceded to the chairman of the appropriations committee.

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[4]Thompson, **Party Leaders of the Time,** 176-8.

He entered the first term as Speaker with the determination to increase the power of the House over that of the Senate. Soon after he was elected he served notice to the upper house that he would stand for no encroachment by making a bitter attack on its method of delaying an appropriation bill in order to force acceptance of an unjust claim of $47,000. To reporters he explained how Reed manipulated the House and implied he would do it the same way:

> Tom Reed was a big feller—one of the biggest fellers I ever knew. It is generally believed that he drew the House before him like a flock of sheep, that nothing could stand against his imperious will. He had the will all right and he drew them. But let me tell you how it was done. When Reed decreed that a certain thing was to be done a few of us had to get out and hustle to see that it was done. Some of the hardest work of my life was 'in goin' among the boys and coaxin' and cajolin' and drivin' and scarin' em into line. We generally managed to do it, but sometimes we had the closest sort of calls. Reed is entitled to all the credit for what he did with that great will power of his, but the world will never know what hard work some of the rest of us performed to make that will effective. Reed was a great man, but he didn't keep close enough to the boys. I believe in consultin' the boys and findin' out what most of 'em want and then goin' ahead and doin' it.[5]

During his first term he possessed considerable influence, but bills passed which he opposed. This did not happen later. At first he used his power with discretion but built for the future. In the second and third Congresses he controlled practically all legislation, and it was this power which was removed in part in the last session. By this time Senate leaders acknowledged the power, and could win over him only with the help of the President.

To preserve this power it was necessary to keep intact the drastic rules inherited from the administration of Speaker Reed. This was accomplished by his former opponent but friend, John Dalzell, member of the rules committee. On the opening day of the new Congress, he would arise and move the adoption of

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[5]**Review of Reviews,** XXVIII, 675-6.

the old rules. Long debate would be prevented by an immediate request for the previous question. When the latter was adopted, twenty minutes were allowed each side. A vote against either of these resolutions by any Republican would for all practical purposes expel him from the party, so that no one took the chance until the 61st Congress. Then the people finally understood the situation and emphatically demanded the change.

What was this power which the Speaker possessed during his term? It was obtained by granting favors to friends and punishing opponents. Several other methods besides the "pork barrel" were available:

(1.) The Speaker possessed the right to recognize any member he desired. When any one arose, the speaker would ask: "For what purpose does the gentleman rise?" He could then refuse recognition. Usually he recognized those representatives who had visited him the day before, explained the nature of the motion, and received the Speaker's permission. The Speaker put this name on the "preferred list". Foes who opposed him in committee or on the floor soon realized their presence in his private room was not desired.

(2.) Unanimous consent legislation was also used for the same purpose. By this procedure bills passed the House without roll call if no one objected. The Speaker forced all those who wished to present this kind of bill to see him before gaining recognition. He claimed that he listened to a bill and then, as one representative, decided whether he would object to it. If he did, he would refuse recognition. As it turned out, if the person making the request had been "good" he would usually receive the favor, otherwise not.

(3.) Calendars were also manipulated by the Speaker. There were two of these: the calendar of the whole house on the state of the union, where all bills, raising revenue were listed; and the House calendar, where others were placed.[6] During the morning hour provisions were made that the committees be called to report any bills on the House calendar they might desire. During most of the Cannon administration, motions for unanimous consent or for consideration of appropriations bills

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[6]**Hind's Precedents,** IV, 172.

cut out the morning hour so that bills could not come before Congress without the Speaker's consent. Committee chairmen were under constant pressure not to report undesirable bills.

(4.) Committees were also named with the desired legislation in mind. If a man favored Cannon's idea, he would be appointed to the appropriate committee. If he did not, he would be moved. In the 60th Congress, Tawney of Minnesota was moved from the ways and means committee, which dealt with the tariff, on which he was considered unsafe, to the appropriations committee, but otherwise he was regular. By promoting him Cannon maintained a "safe" ways and means committee. In the first Congress Cannon made most changes in this way. In later sessions he could not make enough appointments on the better committees to satisfy them all. He also became more vindictive. The Roosevelt landslide by bringing many new Republicans to Congress in 1904 caused him considerable trouble and made him new enemies because he could not give them the appointments they requested. The banking and currency committee as in the Reed period was kept divided in sentiment so they would not agree on legislation. Littlefield of Maine on the judiciary committee was used to prevent labor legislation from passing.

(5.) Special rules were used more and more frequently as the sessions passed. These special orders from the rules committee could be used to change almost any existing rule. They were passed by a majority rather than two-thirds vote, so that Republicans by themselves could change the rules. When the Democrats started to refuse unanimous consent on any measure, the Republicans brought in a special rule whereby rules could be suspended by a mere majority instead of two-thirds vote.[7] In this way any bill could be passed by a majority. This broke all precedents and seemed exceptionally arbitrary to the Democrats. Special rules were also used to return bills to the Senate without considering individual amendments. This was first used to prevent the adoption of several liberal amendments on the Hepburn railroad act.

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[7]**Cong. Rec.**, 60th Cong., 1 sess., 4512-3.

(6.) Caucuses were part of the program. To consider measures Republicans would be requested to meet. Those opposing the Cannon program would understand it to be a conference whose decision would not force those present to vote for the measure, while the Cannon clique would call it a caucus which bound those present to support the bill. Quite often the meeting was postponed until the clique had won enough adherents to put their measures across. At some of these Cannon would speak to show the new members his position and at others he would stand at the door to make sure no one escaped. Finally the Vreeland banking bill was reported directly from the caucus without reference to the committee.

These were the devices used. How did they grow stronger under Cannon? In the first session the Democrats and the Speaker were able to get along with little friction. The next meeting, just before the campaign, brought some criticism of the Speaker. Among the first of those to criticize was Shackleford of Missouri, who did what William Randolph Hearst wanted.[8] When the Roosevelt legislative program was pushed in the 59th Congress more and more special power was required to obtain its enactment and to keep liberal Senate amendments from being added. One of these was the statehood bill to force Arizona and New Mexico to come in as one state. In order to keep the Senate from dividing them, a special rule provided as in the case of the Hepburn act that no amendments could be added in the House.[9] To protest these special rules, the Democrats used dilatory tactics. Lack of a quorum was suggested frequently; motions for adjournment with the necessary roll calls were tried repeatedly; roll calls for approval of the journal were asked; roll calls for every possible motion were requested; roll calls for this and roll calls for that delayed business so much that nothing could be carried out with satisfaction. Unanimous consent was refused. Appropriation bills were delayed. The Republicans brought in more special rules to counteract these tactics and this gave the Democrats the opportunity to accuse them of being arbitrary

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[8]Carlson and Bates, **Hearst,** 121.

[9]**Cong. Rec.,** 58th Cong., 3 sess., 2785.

and dictatorial.

By using these special devices and rules Cannon gradually became more influential in the type of legislation that was passed. What were his interests in this? He thought that the fewer laws passed the longer the Republican party would stay in power. With pride he pointed to the accomplishments of the party and the prosperity which he attributed to its policies. Any reforms, he thought, would upset those prosperous conditions and bring the Democratic party into power. Especially upsetting, he declared, would be a change in the tariff. Whenever this had been changed it seemed to him that the opposite party had come into power. Although the cabinet had believed he would change parts of the tariff, he refused to do it. This became the major interest of his term. Whenever the President inserted the suggestion for a change in the tariff in any message Cannon quickly advised him to eliminate it.[10] As a result Roosevelt in the early sessions cut out all references to this subject and in return secured a promise for railroad rate reform. Later when the President believed something should be done he still met the determined opposition of Cannon. This tariff revision was desired by powerful groups. Even manufacturers wanted free raw materials. Massachusetts boot and shoe makers asked free hides; Illinois agricultural implement manufacturers requested free steel; but, most important of all, newspapers and magazine publishers demanded free newsprint and wood pulp. When refused by Cannon, these papers and magazines pictured his tremendous power as even more ruthless than it was and aroused the people to a pitch where they demanded a change.

Labor too was not satisfied. Cannon believed their request for reforms was another name for special legislation. He repeatedly asserted they represented only a small group in the population and for that reason should have no concessions not given to others. Faced with more and more hostile decisions in the courts, such as in the *Buck's Stove and Range* and *Danbury Hatters* cases, and led by Samuel Gompers, labor groups became more and more insistent on legislation. This embraced

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[10]Roosevelt to Cannon, March 2, 1907, Roosevelt MSS.

an anti-injunction measure, an eight hour bill, model legislation for women and children in the District of Columbia, and adequate prohibition of immigration. They opposed repeal of protective laws for pilots and provisions for compulsory membership for seamen in the naval reserve. When Gompers interviewed Cannon, the Speaker listened but soon replied that labor was not the whole thing and in very heated language closed the interview. Gompers retorted by accusing Cannon of packing the labor and judiciary committees against workingmen, bringing pressure on committee chairmen not to report bills, seeing that bills were referred to subcommittees headed by labor's most bitter opponents, and refusing to recognize members who wished to call up labor bills in the House. The "labor czar" then organized a campaign against the "czar of the House", spoke against congressmen who helped Cannon, went to Danville, Illinois, for a personal contest with the Speaker in his own district, and called together pro-labor members of Congress to form an organization against Cannon. The Speaker won in Danville, but several of his friends were defeated and the labor groups formed part of the later insurgent movement which tamed the Speaker.

Temperance forces joined the labor element in its fight on Cannon and his friends. They desired the Littlefield bill which would have prohibited the shipment of intoxicating liquors into prohibition states. Cannon tried to evade them by claiming the bill was unconstitutional. In 1908 they succeeded in defeating several leading Republican congressmen who had always supported the Speaker.

Angered in part by his refusal to repeal the tariff on newsprint, New England newspapers found a convenient way to appeal to the voters against Cannon. They blamed him for crushing the bill which provided a national forest reservation in the White mountains. Conservationists of all kinds joined in the clamor for this. Ship-subsidy advocates were disappointed because Cannon gave them only half-hearted support. Although traditionally Cannon opposed subsidies, Roosevelt and Watson won his support for a subsidy on lines to South America and Asia. Those people who desired more improvements for the Mississippi River tormented him in the last few sessions, but he refused

to consider any large bond issue for this purpose. He antagonized the women by his vulgarity and by his announcements that they should not be allowed to vote. The President, who constituted a minority group by himself, persuaded Cannon to give him many measures until 1908 when the Speaker failed to listen to the President's request and the clique inserted irritating clauses in appropriation bills. This change in attitude grew as it became more apparent that Roosevelt would support Taft for president.

Cannon might have retained his power, if he had not antagonized the newspapers and magazines. After they demanded a change in the tariff on woodpulp and print paper, bombarded him with telegrams to change it, and saw that he was too stubborn to grant their demands, the muckraking magazines became more bitter, and Republican papers gave him little favorable publicity and challenged his tremendous power. In particular, two popular magazines, *Colliers* and *Success*, assumed the brunt of the attack. Mark Sullivan in *Colliers* at the request of the publishers started a page on which he did nothing but attack the leaders of Congress.[11] He painted a congressman who opposed the Speaker as a hero by printing his picture and listing his name in a roll of honor. Those who had promised to vote against him but changed to Cannon after arriving in Washington were listed as traitors. Young men with ability were challenged to run as candidates against Cannon henchmen. *Success* polled its subscribers by districts to ascertain their attitude toward Cannon and the Congressmen who supported him. A daily report was mailed the Speaker. One whole issue was devoted to an attack on Cannonism. *The Northwestern Christian Advocate*, a religious magazine, added divine sanction to the attack. Editorials bitterly criticized his vulgarity and other habits considered immoral. They delighted in printing the indiscreet speech which he made to an army and navy group on the abolition of the canteen. This publication solicited and printed letters from Methodist bishops attacking Cannon. Among the newspapers the *New York Staats-Zeitung*, the *Kansas City Star* and the *New*

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[11]Sullivan, **The Education of an American**, 244.

York World fought Cannon consistently from the start. Other papers changed gradually. The *Chicago Tribune* vacillated from support to opposition, until in the Taft administration, it was quite violent in its attacks. Both magazines and newspapers were antagonized by the Speaker's refusal to lower the tariff on their raw material. The price on paper was controlled by a monopoly operating both Canadian and United States mills, so that Cannon believed the removal of the tariff would help very little. He believed that if one schedule in the tariff were changed, a demand would be made to change every other.

Personally, Cannon was honest, straightforward, and frank; in his official capacity he prevented needed reforms and favored big business. Even his enemies credited him with being honest and in Washington no one including his enemies doubted his integrity.[12] His picturesque vocabulary of "cuss" words and his cigar-chewing habits gave him the reputation through the country of being a filthy old man. He met delegations from all classes and told them exactly what he thought, no matter how much influence they might have in their home district. Men of his type who deal fearlessly with minorities of all kinds are needed in Washington today. It was in the nineties that minority groups were starting their magazines and controlling public opinion through them. These now had more influence than did a congressman when he spoke or wrote to constituents in his home district. People were reading more. Magazines and newspapers were growing more influential in politics. New problems were arising, too, from the formation of monopolies and concentration of business. Cannon failed to understand this. Fate had cast him in an obstructive role at a time when economic development was posing new problems and when an aroused public opinion was demanding reform.

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[12]Sullivan, **The Education of an American,** 245; Interview with George Norris, August, 1940.

VITA

G. Roger Mayhill was born in Flora, Indiana, on April 10, 1908. As an undergraduate he attended Purdue University, where he received the B.S. degree, with distinction, in January, 1932. From 1932 to 1935 he edited the *Delphi Journal*. In 1935 and 1936 and in the summers of 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940 and 1941, he pursued graduate work at the University of Illinois. A portion of this was *in absentia* in Washington, D. C., and in West Lafayette, Indiana. In June 1936 he received the A.M. degree in history. His master's thesis was a study of William Jennings Bryan as Secretary of State. During the academic year 1936-37 he assisted in the history department of the University of Illinois. Since 1937 he has been an instructor in history and economics at Purdue University. He is a member of Kappa Delta Pi and Kappa Phi Sigma.